



CHINKUCHI

Karate's Hidden Internal Face

Part 1

By Hayashi Tomio, Shifu

I recently reread *Rememberances of Okinawa: Chinkuchi* by Lt. Col. Charles Murray (USAF) written in 1971, with the intention of addressing the subject in more detail for karateka about this fascinating *art within an art*—*Chinkuchi*.

Much of the information attempting to convey the specifics of chinkuchi practice has been scant, anecdotal, or overly general and therefore only marginally successful in defining the complexity of its methods. Few clear and concise records of chinkuchi practices exist in the public domain. So the curious, looking for a progressive understanding of its application, are left only with technical fragments and broad stroke or cryptic commentary.

As a career professional sensei of Okinawan karate for forty-five years and one who has studied isshinryu's kata syllabi in earnest my entire adult life I can say that whatever the old world karate masters of Okinawa understood about chinkuchi, most of it was buried with them or remains the providence of closed door ryu. We do have, however, a public record of their forward most teachings in the kata we inherited from them. Okinawan kata can be thought of as kinesthetic treatises, moving *dialogs*, which offer us some hearty clues to the distinctions between chinkuchi and non-chinkuchi performance. But here lies the rub. Few modern students have been taught to read beyond kata's superficial layers. One needs a chinkuchi key code of sorts. It would be much easier if we simply reanimated the old masters and teleported them into our future to tell us exactly what they meant in regards to chinkuchi training. If chinkuchi was a critical component of karate's development and if it is going to be a vital part of training today, students will need a practical framework of what it is and how it works. Right now, for karate students, chinkuchi exists only as a quasi-reality.



The unique organization behind simple moves, not a technique's novelty, distinguishes mediocre from superb and effortless skill.

To offer some remedy to this issue I want to flesh out Charles Murray's comments about chinkuchi and to add specifically to isshinryu karate's knowledge bank with insights from my study on this subject. Modern karate today has an opportunity to invigorate itself with a grasp of its internal components, the source from which chinkuchi derives its value. It is an indisputable fact to me that Okinawan, Japanese and Korean fighting systems possess an internal face. Karate's future advance may just lie in its ability to recognize this face.

What is Chinkuchi?

Chinkuchi is a psycho-physical system of internal energy management in which a synergy of specific mind and body actions direct the human subtle energies for practical (which includes defense and combat), health-generating and/or spiritual gain. Chinkuchi is not a purely physical technique as in a distinctive way to twist a wrist or execute a kick. Chinkuchi is the management of a non-material energy that avails itself through the conduit of a precisely organized body. Where the whole body structure, breath and inner visual foci are set accordingly, chinkuchi is present. In essence, chinkuchi is an old Okinawan term

for *internal energy control*. *Ki* is the Asian catchall term for the Subtle Energies. *Chin* (bone), *Ku* (sinew), *Chi* (control) is the systematic management of these Subtle Energies. It is noteworthy that the word is not bone/muscle/control but bone/sinew/control. Some light is shed on this distinction from the *Kiko* (Okinawan *Qi Gong*) tendon-strengthening practices which use static postures, two person drills and mental visualizations to increase tendon strength.

Chinkuchi has also been translated as "destructive power," or *bu no chikara* because one of the outcomes of executing its principles leads to instantaneous and extraordinary strength. Its more noted purpose, linked to Okinawa's Sanchin kata, is to imbue students with the power to withstand full impact blows to the body, referred to as Iron Shirt or Golden Bell training, undertaken by many gojuryu practitioners. But in fact, internal energy management enhances all manner of martial technique including the means to strike through the Iron Shirt as well as adding to one's overall vitality. *Kime* is the concentrated focus of this managed energy on a particular task as, for example, throwing a punch or applying a joint lock. Though past karate masters would not have been

familiar with modern scientific research about the human Subtle Energies, we now know they are comprised of electro-magnetic fields, sound waves (both audible and silent, such as *kiai* and breath), light waves, other finer vitalities, and the effects of various psychic states on physical strength and performance. All these vibrational phenomena fall under the single and popular Asian umbrella labeling as Chi or Ki.

There are two interdependent pathways for managing the Subtle Energies. One is solely by specific bodily actions, of which certain essential kata, particularly the Sanchin, give us the best encoding of its principles. The second pathway is through our intention—the act of willing. A clear distinction then can be made between two foundational martial systems or ideologies. The familiar system is the Biomechanical. This obvious and ingrained reference, stressing correct body mechanics, monopolizes the mainstream focus. It emphasizes a vigorous, gross muscular athleticism that expresses external physical mechanics. The second, lesser-known method, one supported by correct body mechanics, could aptly be called the Energy system. In China, martial study of the Energy system is called *Nei Jia Quan* or the ‘Inner Fist School’. These *Inner* schools emphasize mind and intention, relaxation, and Subtle Energy management to generate a refined interior biomechanic. The term ‘Energy system’ also refers to the *conscious* activation of the Subtle Energies — the basis of chinkuchi practice. Because of its nuanced nature, however, advanced internal practice engages less than 1% of the world’s martial community and has therefore caught little of the public’s curiosity. As an aside, Internal exercise done solely for health benefits originating in China, called *Chi Kung*, is a practice enjoyed by millions worldwide.

The word *system* is noteworthy when applied to chinkuchi. Chinkuchi is not a mysterious or random set of variables that somehow magically lead one to heightened states of skill. With an experienced guide, chinkuchi practice offers one an evolutionary path for developing enhanced physical and mental strength, *once the threshold to the reality of subtle energy manipulation is crossed*. That is, you cannot manipulate energies you are not aware exist or don’t believe exist. Consider that Western culture does not offer its young any substantial formal education in Eastern inner practices. Thus, Western initiates of the internal arts are usually surprised to discover a whole new set of exciting but unfamiliar tools. Chinkuchi is only ambiguous because it has been enshrouded in a martial history that has lost much of the specifics of this knowledge, which is why we have such fragmented reasoning about it, and therefor so little interest in pursuing its value. Also, those privileged groups of practitioners who do possess a



Stilling the mind to observe the subtle energies will enhance one’s chinkuchi training.

deep knowledge of chinkuchi practices often keep such information contained within their inner circle.

The best kept Okinawan and Japanese karate secret to this day is that certain Asian martial exercises were performed to develop the human Subtle Energy Body, the immaterial counterpart to our flesh, bone and blood. Though these two systems are not mutually exclusive practices, an emphasis difference sets them apart. Western students have always had an inherent difficulty grasping the Eastern concept of *internal* training or cultivating the Subtle Energy Body. For one, the concept is rarely brought up in most Hard style dojos. Secondly, Subtle Energy Body practices do not fit neatly into physical power constructs ruled by gross muscularity. This fact has led to a general confusion and to most of the prodding speculations about chinkuchi’s reality and merits. The result is a significant gap between the internal and external martial arts communities with each side seemingly unaware of the merits of looking over the fence to the other’s fieldwork and embracing its alternative and complimentary values. Isshinryu, for example, has the potential to be as much of an internal art as an external one. The difference lies in the depth of its technical emphasis. Up to today the karate community has chosen to maintain its focus on well-tested *external* values i.e., hard or surface training routines for a practical and effective expression of technique. Yet everywhere,



There are many ways to physically engage another person and different outcomes will result from one's choice of engagement. Chinkuchi training is an enhancement to karate's biomechanical response. There are no guarantees in a violent or competitive encounter with another person. There are only options and varying degrees of skill in implementing those options. Stances, locks, strikes, and releases can all be optimized by chinkuchi.

and particularly within issheinryu's own kata syllabi, upon close inspection, there is strong and convincing evidence of internal principles at work.

Broad commentaries and speculations cannot actualize chinkuchi's precise nature. Internal practice involves the *conscious* manipulation of human Subtle Energies in succinct ways that are explainable in logical and sequential fashion. Internal principles are both prescribed and calculated actions. They are also multi-dimensional in that they involve multiple bodily systems; respiratory, endocrine, musculo-skeletal, neural, psychic and energetic, cohering toward a specific outcome, thus aligning itself more closely to a martial yoga. The goal of internal practice is to awaken the mind to these unfamiliar wellsprings of power, and to cultivate the Strength Channels. However, the complexity and nuance of such arts cannot be understated. As one contemporary U.S. internal master, Tom Bisio, stated, *"Rather, they are by their nature circular, intertwined and interwoven methods of mastery that are self-iterating. Each aspect of an internal art references and contains each other aspect much like mirrors reflecting into each other, creating infinite images. When we interact with one facet, we interact with all facets on all levels simultaneously. Therefore, internal arts and internal exercises offer many ways to enter into and engage with the process of learning and mastery."*

Two historic evolutions have lead to our modern day

internal practices. Along one path they were adopted unconsciously by individuals highly sensitive to their bodies and then organized into superior movement patterns. People intuitively connected with their own Subtle Energy flow often have little need to articulate the specifics of their bodily expression. This has led to a fundamental problem of grasping exactly what chinkuchi encompasses. In one sense, chinkuchi has been linked with the concept of *Spirit* as in, "the Spirit moves," or "the Spirit enters" a performer, lifting their performance to a greater height. But the alternate path of conscious, premeditated trial and error gave others the ability to clearly articulate and record what they were experiencing. Regardless of the method used to obtain this higher knowledge and/or skill, chinkuchi practices were codified into kata and passed from cultures and across time. Kata is the best time capsule of internal principles that we professional sensei of the Okinawan martial arts have today. It's unfortunate that the manual for decoding kata on this level was often excluded. Doubly unfortunate is that some professional teachers don't care to look beyond the surface of their technique. So one can overlook something brilliant right under his nose— the highly specific structure of his own kata.

See Part II, ***Chinkuchi: The Mechanics of Internal Power***—manipulating the Strength Channels, increasing striking and grappling power, breathing and the Subtle Energy Body, and the *true Crescent Step* revealed.



Looking at a sanchin performance does not reveal its intricate energy flow. Its precise movements circulate Ki to activate both Yin and Yang Strength Channels. Okinawan karate is far more nuanced at advanced levels. Unfamiliar to the novice is that there is a Yin sanchin dachi and a Yang sanchin dachi, Yin fist chambers and Yang fist chambers etc.. The correct selection of mind and body posturing significantly increases the strength of stances, blocks, strikes and releases. Tatsuo Shimabuku, Isshinryu's founder, was aware of karate's energetic effects.

Gather



Open



Control



3 Stages of Sanchin Chinkuchi

Gather—energy is drawn and held in the body core

Open—the primary Strength Channels are opened

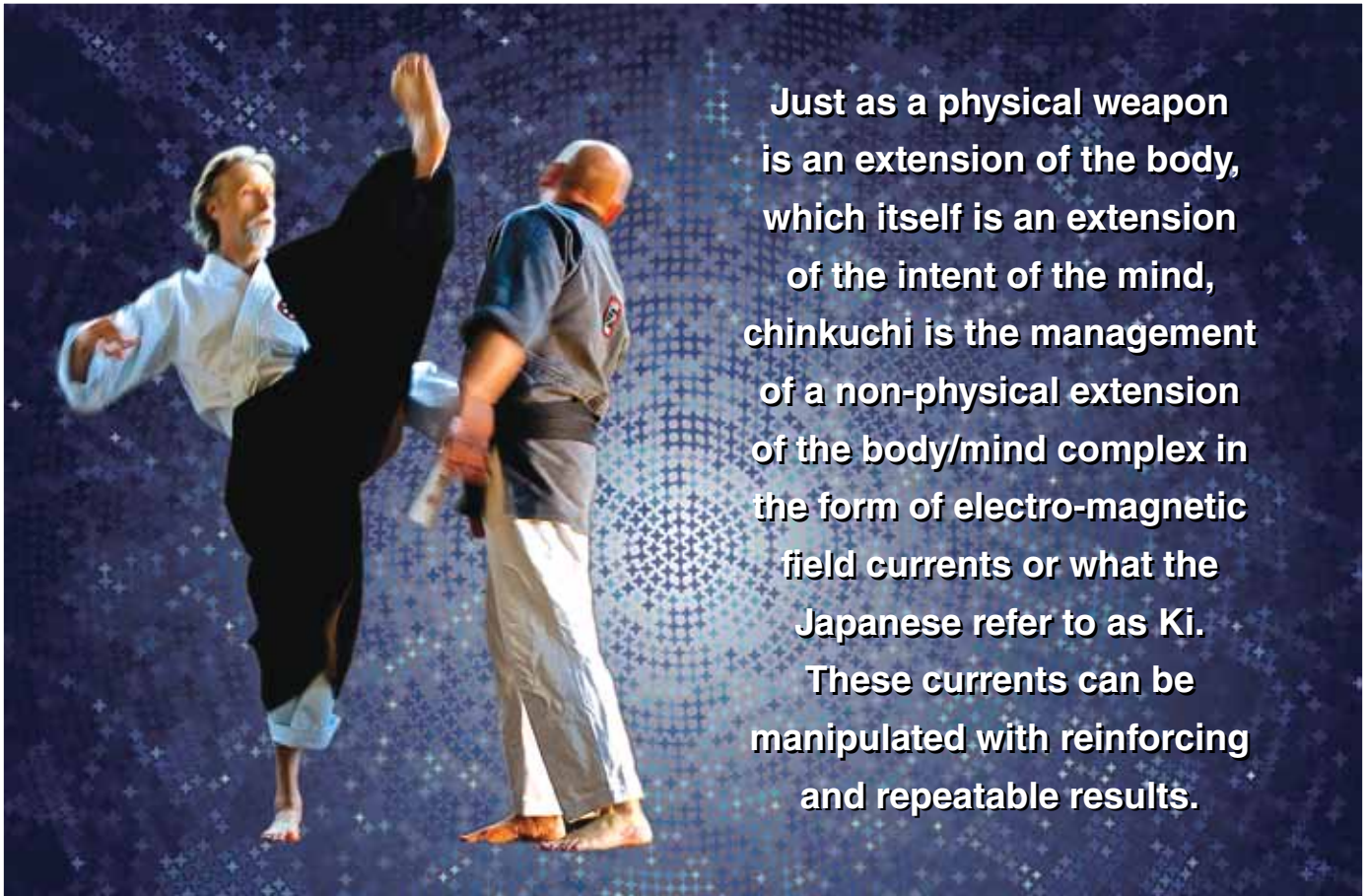
Manage/Control—Specific Strength Channels are activated through Sanchin's precise movement sequences.

the author tells us which man will be victorious in a series of combative illustrations—often before anyone has actually made physical contact. The answer to this riddle of how the author comes to his conclusions lies in understanding how chinkuchi principles function.

Chinkuchi is accomplished by a precise combination of breathing, physical tension/relaxation, correct body alignments, concentrated volition and other key causal factors that can heighten the body's expression of both power and control. In Asia, *pushing hands* was the preferred means of developing the internal sensitivities over purely solo activities, for example, like makiwara striking. For without a guide it is too easy to fall into doubt as to what specific action(s) actually improve your technique - outside of consistent repetition. Chinkuchi is not an intuitive "anything goes" endeavor. Push Hands is the traditional way that energy sensitivity was developed because chinkuchi's combative emphasis is upon defeating another person. Consider that every major Chinese martial art has some form of push hands practice. The benefit here is that a partner can provide instant feedback of your internal manipulations both verbally and/or through each other's contact reflexes.

There are also *degrees* of chinkuchi control as well as different methods for expressing this ability. Proper chinkuchi training is a progressive practice, just as basic technical knowledge proceeds along a developmental sequence. A biomechanical understanding of technique represents only half of the chinkuchi equation. The other half requires a paradigm shift about the nature of authentic power that includes the human Subtle Energies.

In chinkuchi, physical strength is consciously manipulated by sequential bodily tensions in both



Just as a physical weapon is an extension of the body, which itself is an extension of the intent of the mind, chinkuchi is the management of a non-physical extension of the body/mind complex in the form of electro-magnetic field currents or what the Japanese refer to as Ki. These currents can be manipulated with reinforcing and repeatable results.

still and ballistic posturing. In his book, *Isshinryu*, (1980) author John Lennox presents a crude illustration by Kichiro Shimabuku of Sanchin's muscular tension sequence that his father, Tatsuo, alleges, if done incorrectly, will cause injury or illness. What you cannot see in anyone's kata performance is how and what order his or her musculature is tensed. Knowledge of the tension/relaxation sequence makes up a critical part of the *inner* kata manual while broad physical movements are considered kata's *outer* form. Counterintuitive kata actions have been particularly problematic for Western martial artists because the round peg of internal energy principles does not fit neatly into the square formula of western power constructs. Westerners who try to make sense of internal principles by crunching them into a compartmentalized, gross strength paradigm often neutralize their affects. What is needed instead is to embrace an altogether different way of thinking.

One ill fit for Americans is how we understand relaxation mostly via tension. Western societies often define themselves by their degrees of stress and pressure. That is, we think of relaxation as an *absence of tension* the same way we think of health as an absence of disease. Absence of disease is only the baseline for health. Likewise, absence of physical tension is only the baseline

for relaxation. Relaxation physiology is more dynamic than the release of contracted or tight muscles. Varying states of relaxation are mechanisms for opening different internal channels for a more dynamic Ki flow.

The primer for internal power cultivation in Okinawan karate is its Sanchin kata. Interestingly, in the book, *The Way of Sanchin*, (YMAA Publications, 2007), I was surprised that the author's Goju ideology barely touched upon any chinkuchi-type practice of the form's use as an internal energy cultivator. I feel compelled to write *The Other Way of Sanchin* as a counterpoint to avoid misleading the martial community into thinking that the value of sanchin lay mostly in this work's highlighted lessons. This may be the value for goju practioners but not the potential gain for isshinryu students. A rich body of knowledge exists within this form regarding the Subtle Energies.

In regards to breathing, Murray tweaks our curiosity by emphasizing that we must *exhale* upon striking. But if we push this door wider we find Asian 'breathing 'is not meant solely as the action of air/oxygen passing in and out of the lungs. Breathing is also synonymous to ki flow. American's trying to decipher foreign arts sometimes discover to their chagrin that the Asians mean something



This example shows some aspects of the rich, multi-dimensional system of Chinkuchi. An assaultive charge is met with a Seuchin stance and double arm stop. According to the chinkuchi principle that stance supports arms—arms support stance, it is imperative that the body's Strength Channels move as indicated, and that the breath is properly synchronized with the stop/hit. What is not apparent is how much more powerful this response is (for example, if the right hand had been initially turned down in photo one or the left arm tucked tightly into the body), how rooted the stance becomes, and how it preps the opponent for a concluding neck lock, not by the obvious placement of the right hand on the neck, but how activating a precise energy flow in the arms reduces the opponent's actual physical resistance to being bent forward.

entirely different. Therefore, to balance Murray's chinkuchi equation we must add that *inhaling* is as vital as exhaling, and that not every strike is supported by an exhale. In light of chinkuchi practices, some strikes/manipulations are actually more lethal when done inhaling (one of those counter-intuitive principles of internal work and something most practitioners might miss watching a master's demonstration).

Because breathing can refer to the motion of the Subtle Energy Body it is important that readers understand this critical point. *The Subtle Energy Body can be trained to move opposite the actions of the physical body* with noticeable effect. This is a highly advanced concept. You cannot "see" internal techniques. But with proper training a person can sense or identify shifting energy fields. You can certainly feel the results of a technique "supercharged," as my former sensei would say, with internal principles.

Murray's third element, 'mind control,' is an appropriate term. Others have described the involvement of the mind as a form of self-suggestion. In Hard style chinkuchi (Hard here refers to the physical plane) we control the Strength Channels by gathering and then 'transmitting' effective energy mechanically via muscular tension sequences. But chinkuchi practice can be subdivided into Hard and Soft methods. This subjective categorization is determined by how much conscious mind and/or active body is behind the control of the Subtle Energy flow, because it is quite possible for a non-initiate to move a great deal of energy into a limb but have no awareness that this is occurring. This would be considered an *intuitive* alignment and the use of chinkuchi principles.

Breathing, with its wide range of functions, can be used to enhance the body's multiple *tandens* (energy centers) for different physical



In this chinkuchi example the defender's actions in breaking the clinch are energetically precise. His right hand, whether initiating from an inside or outside position, moves to the outside by circling under and over the opponent's left arm at the wrist and then brushes down the central meridian of the opponent. The left arm stays outside, and avoids contacting the opponent's right arm. Note the dual direction of the Strength Channel flow in the arms and grounding channel in the left leg. Not only does this action stop the opponent's forward momentum, but it weakens his energy field, making the concluding moves, an arm bar to a shoulder lock (not shown) that follow the kata sequence, much easier to insert.

outcomes. The mind directs/controls the flow of Ki by way of the Strength Channels which are activated by specific breathing patterns and muscular tension/relaxation cycles. Respiration is fundamentally a tension/relaxation cycle in itself, allowing us to orient the breath (Ki flow) in the chest, mid-body or belly to magnify defensive and offensive actions. Each method creates discrete differences in the power behind karate technique. It was not part of the Western paradigm of American pioneers to pay attention to where in the body their Asian masters were breathing (i.e., directing energy).

A New/Old Standard of Testing

There are many chinkuchi formulas to achieve similar ends, which is probably why martial artists get baffled seeing one master demonstrate a sequence slightly different from another. Choosing to perform a kata sequence differently however, is not an indication of either inferior or superior technical execution or the use of internal principles. Variations occur in energy flow from person to person, but there are over-arching rules that, applied correctly, will maximize strength. Many non-internal driven forms may look enticing on the outside but lack authentic power

when applied. Some modern kata even violate internal principles. In the future we may be able to use internal testing to validate the standard of different movement sequences. That is, we should be able to determine the optimum execution of any technical sequence by subjecting its application to an internal standard.

Martial Mediocrity

Right now we have a growing mediocrity within the U.S. martial community regarding karate technique in general. A great watering down of skills is taking place within the traditional mainstream venues. The Kata arts are under siege for lack of more acute comprehension. Contributing to this decline is our Western disorientation when trying to grasp the significance of internal practices, which can yield a treasure of meaning for motivating students to practice traditional forms. Add to the problem the speed with which people are moved through their martial systems today — two years to black belt, on average — and one can easily see why deep layers of the martial arts are being lost. We also tend to look at parts rather than the whole. For example, some video capture of early masters focused only upon sections of the master's bodies. This is missing the trees



for the forest. We need to see a performer's whole body to get the full technique and of paramount importance, we must gain access to the full explanation of a form's *inner* expression, if known. To understand chinkuchi you must think of the body as a one-piece unit, not a collection of parts, as if when punching, only your arm matters.

If we are going to enthuse future disciples and move them to greater heights of skill we must rise above vague mysticisms and technical ambiguities assigned to a karate move simply because a past master did it. We must strive to unlock the core reasoning behind their compositions. As Isshin Kempo master, Tian Zhua, a senior martial artist with thirty years experience, once asked, "Where is the natural curiosity and scrutiny to get at the truth of our martial practices? Are professional sensei going to spend their whole careers reiterating to their students the sole answer—*that's the way our martial fathers did it?*"

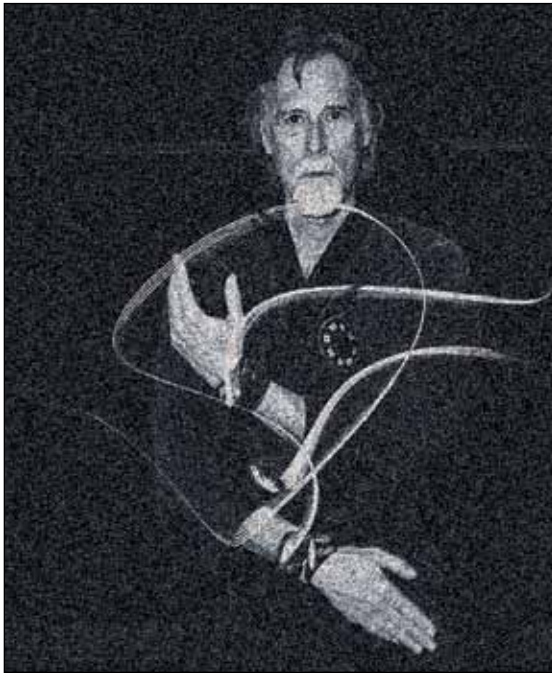
Stating that chinkuchi practice differs from the gross expression of a karate move often raises more questions and curiosities—a dialog worth engaging.

The Crescent Step

In his book, *The Heart of Karatedo* by Shigeru Egami, (Kodansha International Ltd, 1976, pg 51), the author, referring to sanchin dachi, states, "*Since this is a stance handed down by pioneers of the art, I believe it is worthy of consideration and study...*" Egami shows us a picture of the "old hourglass" stance, remarkable similarity

to a Seisan dachi. Egami's statement hints that even he is not quite sure about this posture's martial relevance, "*not currently practiced within the Shoto Kai,*" he adds. I suspect what Egami is unsure sure about is this dachi's *internal* fundamentals.

Beginners introduced to Sanchin or Seisan dachi crescent stepping are often baffled why one would move in such an odd manner. Though many fighting styles adopt side and slip-stepping motions, few engage in half-moon or semi-circular stepping in real bouts, which raises the question, why not? The empiricists point out that the crescent step can be used to bisect an opponent's leg guard by cutting around and inside their lead leg to uproot their balance. This obvious rationale is what we refer to as a technique's *exoteric* or outer value. In every marital art, regardless of how or why it was passed down there is also an *esoteric* or 'inner' rationale—*always!* The inner rationale reveals how the Subtle Energies are affecting or being affected by the outer action. An exceptional internal master can often point out the interior details or lack thereof in most techniques. Chinkuchi is the practice of the *inner* details of a move. This is an altogether different language from a technique's *outer* details. Of course, there are fighting systems passed through the ages that have their inner principles intuitively embedded into them. Some masters just flowed. As I stated earlier, this was one of the two historical pathways that lead us to chinkuchi's evolution. But those who study with conscious research



**Authentic chinkuchi practice
is neither mystical nor magical.
Its principles are grounded in
human Biofield functioning which
science is just beginning to bear out.
Internal disciplines manipulate this
subtle field and provide an
exciting arena for exploration.**

can articulate these internal mechanics and provide us with a clear map for how to move through this unfamiliar terrain. So what exactly then is the crescent step from the chinkuchi perspective?

Chinkuchi crescent stepping is a ki-pumping action that maximizes the flow of energy in the leg's Strength Channels for enhanced body power. The maximization occurs as a result of the semicircular leg action, which activates all the primary leg meridians simultaneously, something that straightforward stepping does not accomplish. Chinkuchi crescent stepping is a far more specific action than just gliding the leg in a general arc. It involves the movement of the upper thigh, the foreleg, precise knee flexion and abductor/adductor orientation, and the arc must cross the body's mid-line (spine). The foot must skim low to the ground, with weight forward on the ball, and assume a particular proportionality in length and width to maintain an open flow of energy in the Bubbling Springs acupressure point on the bottoms of the feet. It must also be understood that the actions of the left and right foot are not considered equal motions from a Subtle Energy standpoint. This is often why we see very distinct stance work in kata. For example, *isshinryu's* *Seiuchin Kata* is paired with the stance of the same name because only that particular *dachi* will fully activate the hand patterns that accompany it. Also, depending upon the stance transitions, each foot/leg may alternate in value between a Yin or Yang action.

Why aspire to such detail and complicate the simple action of crescent stepping? The answer for the internal masters lay in the observations that this attention to detail could result in instantly *doubling* one's physical

strength—a goal well worth achieving. Unfortunately, I have found that one must directly experience the full effects of chinkuchi principles in a hands-on demonstration to feel the nature of this powerful art running beneath one's surface technique, otherwise pure talk tends to hold the concept of chinkuchi in a limbo of “nice theory.” I can assure readers that chinkuchi is not just a nice theory.

There are other inner fundamentals to crescent stepping that would require greater explanation than this article can afford and which appear unknown or unavailable to the general karate community at this time. There appear few modern experts today who possess enough knowledge of the internal mechanisms of their Hard style kata systems to fully activate its chinkuchi principles. In the future we hope our organization will provide a catalyst for an emerging *internal karatedo* to benefit the international karate community and those interested in this exciting, though currently deemed *mysterious* study. ☺



Christopher J. Goedecke who goes by his Buddhist name, Hayashi Tomio, Shifu, Hachidan, is the head of the Isshin Kempo system and a Buddhist monk in the Chen Yen Shingon Mikkyo 'Mi Ching' sect. His system uses all the kata of isshinryu. Hayashi is a full time career martial arts teacher with forty-five years experience. His organization has spent the last twenty-two years researching the internal techniques of isshinryu kata. You can find more of Hayashi Tomio's ideas at www.isshinkempo.com